

Lieutenant Colonel James Brown of the United States Army stepped off the Black Hawk helicopter straight into a swarm of swinging sticks. "The fight was on," he recalls. "We had to push them back and fight our way to our men."

It was April 4, 2000, and Brown was the commanding officer of the Army's 709th Military Police Battalion, part of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. Several hours earlier, a squad of six MPs had searched a house in a mountain-shrouded

town called Sevice. They had seized two hand grenades, as well as the grenades' owner. But as the soldiers wrestled their detainee back to their Humvees, a crowd began to gather, a crowd that soon grew to several hundred people, shouting and closing in on the soldiers. There was no way out: The townspeople blocked the streets, and others set up blockades on the edge of town and at a bridge farther down the road.

Brown got a call and raced to the scene with 17 more MPs aboard two Black Hawks. Once on the ground, he and his men, protected by body armor, pushed through the stick-wielding mob. Brown began negotiating with the crowd's leaders. Most crucially, he worked to persuade them that the suspect would be returned. But just as it seemed that they were coming to accept his word, 50 men stormed toward the helicopter that was ready to take the suspect away. They snatched him and began fighting the MPs hand to hand. Several soldiers sustained broken hands or bloodied faces.

Almost immediately, Brown was hit in the neck by a large rock; other rocks pelted members of his team. His men decided that enough was enough. They trained their weapons on the most aggressive attackers and opened fire.

The results were profound—not because of the bloody carnage, but because of the lack of it. Instead of firing hundreds of deadly .223-caliber bullets, the soldiers fired sponge-tipped rounds—40mm-wide canisters capped with green high-density foam, shot from rifle-mounted launchers. One of these hit the man who threw the rock at Brown. He screamed, threw his hands to his face, and bolted in the opposite direction. "The nonlethal rounds achieved a tremendous effect: Everyone backed up immediately and settled down," Brown recalls. "By the rules of engagement, my soldiers could have chosen to shoot people. We would have had a very bloody day, and it would have had a terrible effect on everyone in Kosovo."

Later, the U.N. mission discussed the incident with local Serbian-Kosovar leaders, who accepted responsibility for the disturbance—something that almost certainly would not have happened if it had resulted in deaths. The suspect eventually turned himself in, and the peacekeepers had no more trouble in the region. "The purpose of conflict is conflict resolution," Brown explains, "and we've found that when people are treated well in conflict, it makes a tremendous contribution to establishing order."

Welcome to the new military order, where sometimes the best defense is a good nonlethal offense.

That the U.S. military, traditionally known for its pursuit of efficient deadly force, is now energetically seeking ways *not* to kill people is a striking turn of events. The confrontation in Kosovo was a pivotal moment for the U.S. armed forces: It demonstrated that a new generation of nonlethal weapons—of which the sponge-tipped projectile is among the lowest-

tech—could quell violence, and signaled the military's understanding of the complicated nature of modern warfare.

The Kosovo clash was one in a line of politically sensitive and highly visible confrontations that extend from the 1993 Mogadishu uprising to the 1994–95 Haitian debacle to the complex police action that may follow a war in Iraq (at press time, the Iraq crisis had not been resolved, nor had war been declared). The operative lesson is that military or peacekeeping missions in civilian-heavy environments require comparatively delicate tactics to protect the innocent, isolate the aggressive and manage public perception.

In 1996, spurred by this dawning awareness, the Department of Defense created the Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Direc-



Kosovo, April 4, 2000

Attacked by a mob, members of the U.S. Army's 709th Military Police Battalion think fast and avert a massacre.

torate. Coordinated by the U.S. Marine Corps from a small building at its base in Quantico, Virginia, the directorate oversees the development of new nonlethal weapons at facilities around the country for use by all branches of the armed services in situations in which lethal force would be counterproductive, indiscriminate or just plain ugly.

"Our adversaries have been doing things like using human shields—firing from behind women and children—and hiding among the civilian populace," says Lt. Colonel Paul Thee, who heads the High Power Microwave Division of the Air Force Research Laboratory's Directed Energy Directorate, based at Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "We need to be able to stop attackers or drive away the women and children shields so we can confront the gunmen. Our troops have to be able to defend themselves."

The nonlethal directorate's mandate is to improve the weapons long used by police forces worldwide: rubber and plastic bullets, which killed approximately 20 people when used by British soldiers in the peak years of the Northern Ireland violence; and the notoriously imprecise tear gas, which

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By Eric Adams

ILLUSTRATION BY
BRIAN CRONIN